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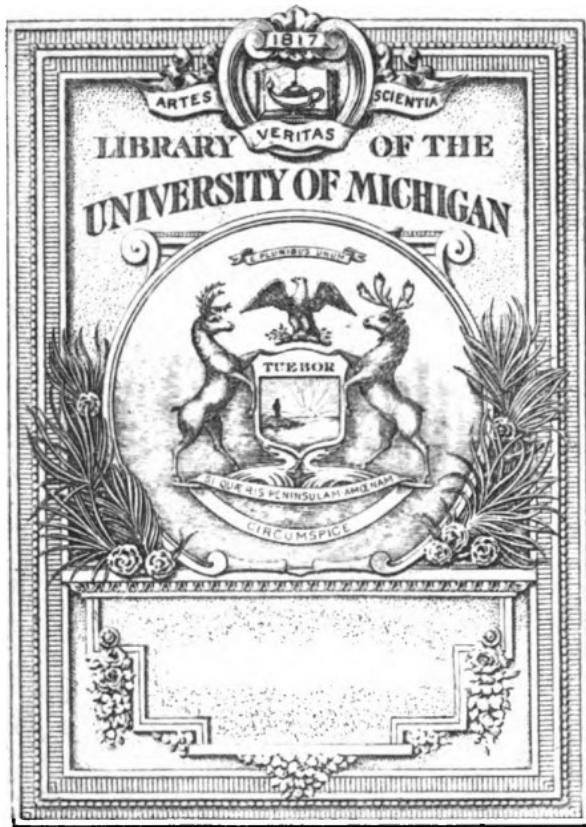
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# COLORS OF LIFE



# NEW POETRY : FALL 1918

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# COLORS OF LIFE

## POEMS AND SONGS AND SONNETS

BY

MAX EASTMAN



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*To One Who Loves Them  
And Whose Beauty Crowned Their Dreams.*



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## CONTENTS

AMERICAN IDEALS OF POETRY — A PREFACE	13
POEMS	
COMING TO PORT	43
THE LONELY BATHER	45
IN MY ROOM	46
HOURS	47
FIRE AND WATER	48
YOU MAKE NO ANSWER	49
OUT OF A DARK NIGHT	50
A MORNING	51
ANNIVERSARY	52
AUTUMN LIGHT	53
A MODERN MESSIAH	54
IN A RED CROSS HOSPITAL	55
A VISIT	56
TO LOVE	58
CAR-WINDOW	59
LITTLE FISHES	60
INVOCATION	61

SOMETIMES	62
TO MARIE SUKLOFF — AN ASSASSIN	63
TO AN ACTRESS	65
EYES	66
X RAYS	67

## SONNETS

A PREFACE ABOUT SONNETS	71
A PRAISEFUL COMPLAINT	74
THOSE YOU DINED WITH	75
THE PASSIONS OF A CHILD	76
AS THE CRAG EAGLE	77
TO MY FATHER	78
TO EDWARD S. MARTIN	79
EUROPE — 1914	80
ISADORA DUNCAN	81
THE SUN	82
THE NET	83
A DUNE SONNET	84

## SONGS

SEA-SHORE	87
RAINY SONG	88
A HYMN TO GOD	90
COMING SPRING	91
DAISIES	92
BOBOLINK	93
DIogenes	94

## **EARLIER POEMS**

<b>A PREFACE ABOUT THEIR PHILOSOPHY</b>	<b>97</b>
<b>AT THE AQUARIUM</b>	<b>102</b>
<b>EARTH'S NIGHT</b>	<b>103</b>
<b>THE THOUGHT OF PROTAGORAS</b>	<b>104</b>
<b>TO THE ASCENDING MOON</b>	<b>107</b>
<b>LEIF ERICSON</b>	<b>110</b>
<b>MIDNIGHT</b>	<b>116</b>
<b>IN MARCH</b>	<b>117</b>
<b>THE FLOWERS AT CHURCH</b>	<b>118</b>
<b>TO THE LITTLE BED AT NIGHT</b>	<b>120</b>
<b>IN A DUNGEON OF RUSSIA</b>	<b>121</b>
<b>TO A TAWNY THRUSH</b>	<b>125</b>
<b>THE SAINT GAUDENS STATUES</b>	<b>127</b>
<b>SUMMER SUNDAY</b>	<b>129</b>



## AMERICAN IDEALS OF POETRY

### A PREFACE

It is impossible for me, feeling and watching the eternal tidal currents of liberty and individual life against tyranny and the type, which are clashing and rearing up their highest crimsoned waves at this hour, to publish without some word of depreciation a book of poems so personal for the most part, and reflecting my own too easy taste of freedom rather than my sense of the world's struggle towards an age and universe of it. That struggle has always occupied my thoughts, and often my energies, and yet I have never identified myself with it or found my undivided being there. I have found that rather in individual experience, and in those moments of energetic idleness when the life of universal nature seemed to come to its bloom of realization in my consciousness. Life is older than liberty. It is greater than revolution. It burns in both camps. And life is what I love. And though I love life for all men and women, and so inevit-

✓ ably stand in the ranks of revolution against the cruel system of these times, I love it also for myself. And its essence — the essence of life — is variety and specific depth. It can not be found in monotonous consecration to a general principle. Therefore I have feared and avoided this consecration, which earnest friends for some reason always expect me to exemplify, and my poetry has never entered even so deeply as it might into those tempests of social change that are coloring our thoughts today.

Poetry that has life for its subject, and [democratic reality,] is rather expected to manifest that irregular flow and exuberance of material over structure with which Walt Whitman challenged the world. In America at least the freedom and poignant candor of strong art is associated with the tradition that he founded, and little is granted to that other tradition which finds its original in Edgar Allan Poe. There existed in Europe, however, a succession of poets whose eyes turned back in admiration to Poe, and they were [poets of reality, and those who touched the mood of democratic revolt.] And for my part I think there is a modern validity in the attitudes of both these poets, a certain adjudication between them which a perfectly

impersonal science might propose; and that is what I should like to discuss with those who may enter sympathetically into this little volume.

They will all be familiar, I suppose, with Walt Whitman's ideal of an American poetry so free and strong and untrammelled of ornamentation, that it should go out of the books it was published in and stand up with the hills and forests on the earth.

"The poetry of the future," he said, "aims at the free expression of emotion, (which means far, far more than appears at first,) and to arouse and initiate, more than to define or finish. . . .

"In my opinion the time has arrived to essentially break down the barriers of form between prose and poetry. I say the latter is henceforth to win and maintain its character regardless of rhyme, and the measurement-rules of iambic, spondee, dactyl, &c., and that even if rhyme and those measurements continue to furnish the medium for inferior writers and themes, (especially for persiflage and the comic, as there seems henceforward, to the perfect taste, something inevitably comic in rhyme, merely in itself, and anyhow,) the truest and greatest *Poetry*, (while subtly and necessarily always rhythmic, and distinguishable easily enough,) can never again, in the English language, be express'd

in arbitrary and rhyming metre, any more than the greatest eloquence, or the truest power and passion. While admitting that the venerable and heavenly forms of chiming versification have in their time play'd great and fitting parts — that the pensive complaint, the ballads, wars, amours, legends of Europe, &c., have, many of them, been inimitably render'd in rhyming verse — that there have been very illustrious poets whose shapes the mantle of such verse has beautifully and appropriately envelopt — and though the mantle has fallen, with perhaps added beauty, on some of our own age — it is, notwithstanding, certain to me, that the day of such conventional rhyme is ended. In America, at any rate, and as a medium of highest æsthetic practical or spiritual expression, present or future, it palpably fails, and must fail, to serve. The Muse of the Prairies, of California, Canada, Texas, and of the peaks of Colorado, dismissing the literary, as well as social etiquette of over-sea feudalism and caste, joyfully enlarging, adapting itself to comprehend the size of the whole people, with the free play, emotions, pride, passions, experiences, that belong to them, body and soul — to the general globe, and all its relations in astronomy, as the savans portray them to us — to the modern, the busy Nineteenth century, (as grandly poetic as

any, only different,) with steamships, railroads, factories, electric telegraphs, cylinder presses — to the thought of the solidarity of nations, the brotherhood and sisterhood of the entire earth — to the dignity and heroism of the practical labor of farms, factories, foundries, workshops, mines, or on ship-board, or on lakes and rivers — resumes that other medium of expression, more flexible, more eligible — soars to the freer, vast, diviner heaven of prose."

It may surprise some people to see this monumental challenge to the poets of the future confronted with the pathetic memory of Edgar Allan Poe. And yet it is natural to place these two poets in contrast, and the weight neither of genius nor of influence is altogether upon one side. They are the two American poets of unique distinction, and they are the fountains of the two strongest influences in all modern poetry of the occident. And it is worth observing that if Walt Whitman had written as few pages of poetry as Poe did, his name would hardly be remembered, whereas Poe would have established a literary tradition if he had written but five sorrowful lyrics. His individuality was so poignant. His art was so exquisite. And not only was his art exquisite, but his philosophy of his art was as unique, assertive, and

prodigious in contempt for his predecessors,) as that of Walt Whitman. I have never read anything about any art more sheer and startling in its kind, than Poe's essay on "The Philosophy of Composition"; and nothing more energetically opposite to Walt Whitman could possibly be devised. To convey the flavor of the contrast, I quote these sentences — inadequate for any other purpose — from Poe's essay:

"Most writers — poets in especial — prefer having it understood that they compose by a species of fine frenzy — an ecstatic intuition; and would positively shudder at letting the public take a peep behind the scenes at the elaborate and vacillating crudities of thought, at the true purposes seized only at the last moment, at the innumerable glimpses of idea that arrived not at the maturity of full view, at the fully matured fancies discarded in despair as unmanageable, at the cautious selections and rejections, at the painful erasures and interpolations — in a word, at the wheels and pinions, the tackle for scene-shifting, the step-ladders and demon-traps, the cock's feathers, the red paint and the black patches. . . .

"For my own part, I have neither sympathy with the repugnance alluded to, nor at any time the least

difficulty in recalling to mind the progressive steps of any of my compositions; and, since the interest of an analysis, or reconstruction, such as I have considered a *desideratum*, is quite independent of any real or fancied interest in the thing analyzed, it will not be regarded as a breach of decorum on my part to show the *modus operandi* by which some one of my own works was put together. I select 'The Raven' as most generally known. . . .

"Let us dismiss, as irrelevant to the poem *per se*, the circumstance — or say the necessity — which in the first place gave rise to the intention of composing a poem that should suit at once the popular and critical taste.

"We commence, then, with this intention.

"The initial consideration was that of extent. If any literary work is too long to be read at one sitting, we must be content to dispense with the immensely important effect derivable from unity of impression; for, if two sittings be required, the affairs of the world interfere, and everything like totality is at once destroyed. . . .

"My next thought concerned the choice of an impression, or effect, to be conveyed: and here I may as well observe that, throughout the construction, I kept steadily in view the design of rendering the work *universally* appreciable. I should be car-

ried too far out of my immediate topic were I to demonstrate a point upon which I have repeatedly insisted, and which with the poetical stands not in the slightest need of demonstration — the point, I mean, that Beauty is the sole legitimate province of the poem. . . .

“But in subjects so handled, however skilfully, or with however vivid an array of incident, there is always a certain hardness or nakedness, which repels the artistical eye. Two things are invariably required: first, some amount of complexity, or more properly, adaptation; and, second, some amount of suggestiveness, some under-current, however indefinite, of meaning. It is this latter, in especial, which imparts to a work of art so much of that *richness* (to borrow from colloquy a forcible term) which we are too fond of confounding with *the ideal*.”

The opposition of these two characters and attitudes is complete. Upon the one side a vast preoccupation with human meaning and morals, with health and the common reality and love and democracy, a grand contempt for beauty, and for the effort to attract or gratify a reader with “verbal melody,” a contempt for everything that savors of deliberate technique in art. Upon the other side

also contempt — contempt like a piece of cold analytical steel for every pretense that the technique of art is not deliberate, that poets are not seeking to attract and gratify, that truth or moral or meaning instead of beauty is the portent of a poem — a disposition to seek beauty in unique and even unhealthy places, a lonely aristocratic heart of pain, and a preoccupation with "verbal melody" never before or since equalled in poetry. The details of this difference are fascinating, but the generalization of it is what will illumine the modern problems about poetry. To Edgar Allan Poe a poem was an objective thing, to Walt Whitman poetry was an act of subjective expression. Poe would take sounds and melodies of words almost actually into his hands, and carve and model them until he had formed a beautiful vessel, and he would take emotions and imaginations out of his heart and weave and inlay them in that vessel, and even the crimson out of his blood, and finally for "enrichment" he would seek out in his mind the hue of some meaning or moral to pour over it until it was perfect. And these beautiful vessels he would set forth for view and purchase, standing aside from them like a creative trader, proud, but no more identified with them than as though he had made them out of the colors

of shells. To Walt Whitman a poem was not a thing. His poetry was himself. His meanings, emotions, experiences, love and wonder of life, filled him and he overflowed in language — without “art,” without purpose but to communicate his being. So he maintained. His poem was never an object to him, even after it had flowed full and he sought to perfect its contours. His emendations were not often objective improvements; they were private remodellings to make the language a more direct and fluent identity with what he considered himself. This was the task upon which he labored as the poet of democracy and social love.

Now, it is not merely an accident, or a reflection upon America or upon human nature, that Walt Whitman, with all his yearnings over the average American and his offering of priesthood and poetry to the people, should remain the poet of a rather esoteric few, whereas Poe — even with the handful of poems he wrote — may be said to be acceptable to the generality of men. The Raven, or Helen, or Annabelle Lee, or some sad musical echo of the death of beauty, might be found in illuminated covers on the most “average” of American parlor tables, but never anything there of Walt Whitman — unless it be “Captain, My Captain!” the

one rather weak metrical poem he deigned to write. And there is something deeply and really pathetic in this fact, and something which [only an adequate science of verse can explain.] For the emotions and the meanings of Walt Whitman's poetry are actually the ones that interest simple and thoughtful people who have leisure to feel. His realizations of life would be acceptable and be honored, as much at least as great art is ever honored, by the "divine average," if they had been conveyed, as Poe's were, in vessels of light, which would [make them objective,] and from which they might brim over with excess of subjective meaning and emotion.

I do not mean to express a wish that Walt Whitman had conveyed them so, or the opinion that he could have been a more stupendous poetic and moral hero of nature by writing otherwise than he did. His propulsive determination to put forth in this facile nineteenth century culture, sweet with the decay and light with the remnant fineries of feudal grandeur, the original, vast, unfinished substance of man, was a phenomenon like the rising of a volcanic continent amid ships on the sea. No word but the words in his book can portray the magnitude of his achievement; no critic but Envy could judge it except as itself and by its own standard. But as a prophetic example of the poems of the

future, and especially the poems of democracy and social love, it suffers a weakness — the weakness that Walt Whitman's character suffered. It is ego-centric and a little inconsiderate of the importance of other people. Walt Whitman composed wonderful passages about universal social love, but he could not be the universal poet exactly because he was not social enough. He was not humble enough to be social. The rebel egoism of democracy was in him the lordly and compelling thing, and though his love for the world was prodigious, it was not the kind of love that gives attention instinctively to the egoism of others.

There may be no grand passion for the idea, but there is a natural companionship with the fact of "democracy," in Poe's statement that he "kept steadily in view the design of rendering the work universally appreciable," and that statement more characteristically distinguishes his attitude from Walt Whitman's than the different ways they had of talking about beauty. All poets who mould their poems objectively, even though they may conceive themselves to be utterly alone with beauty, are really in social communion with humanity. For that is what the word *objective* means. An object, or as we say, a "thing," differs from other elements of our experience only in that it can be

experienced in the same form at different times and by different persons. And for an object to be beautiful is for it to [hold value in itself], so that various perceivers may come from all sides and find it there. Therefore one who moulds an object towards external perfection, however sad his solitude, enters directly into the "universal friendship" toward which Walt Whitman directed so much of the longing of his words. One who pours out phrases direct from his emotion may experience a relief and glory that implies listeners, and he may win listeners, but they will each rebuild out of his phrases their own different poem, and they will comprise in their number only those endowed with the special power to build poems out of phrases poured out. And whatever we may wish were true of the world, it is not true that the majority are so endowed. Therefore the poetry that is highly subjective is almost inevitably the poetry of a few; and the "direct expression of emotion" achieves a less clear and general social communion than the embodiment of emotion in an object of art.

It could be established, I believe, with [mechanical precision], that the rhythmic values most cherished by the social rebels who now write so much "free verse," are values practically incomunicable to others, and absolutely incomunicable by the

method usually adopted, that of printing words on a page. A little of that [icy matter-of-fact realism] with which Poe used to scatter the sweet foggy thoughts of the literarious, while it might not affect the art of these poets, would surely reduce the volume of what they have to say about it. For instance, here is the answer of one of them to an assertion that the line division in free-verse is "arbitrary," and that if we copied one of these long poems in solid prose, the poet himself could hardly ever divide it again as it was:

"Free verse that is free verse is *not* arbitrary. Much of it is, of course — so are many canvases mere splashy imitations of Matisse. But there is free verse that resolves itself into just those lines — a little more subtly than sonnets or trios — by virtue of pauses, of heart-beats, of the quickness or slowness of your breath, and maybe of your pulse itself. . . . It tries to give the rhythm value of those hesitations, those quickenings and slowings of the flow of ideas, the flutterings — it is *closer to the breath*, as modern music and modern dance are, or as primitive music and primitive dance were."

It is impossible not to respond to such assertions, for we know in ourselves what these exquisite differential experiences are. Any one who has ever written love-letters — which are a kind of aboriginal

free-verse — knows what they are. And yet I believe it is obvious, if not demonstrable, that most of them are too individual to be communicated even to a lover. [Human nature is too various] for it to be true that the same hesitations, the same quickenings and slowings of the flow of ideas, flutterings of the breath or pulse, will reproduce themselves in another upon the perception of the same visible symbols. And while this fact may make the art of composition seem a little monotonous, it is better that art should be monotonous than that the world should. And it would be a monotonous world in which different people were so much alike, or we ourselves so much alike at different moments, that these minute filigrees of feeling should be altogether durable and capable of being served round in paper and ink.

There are values of verbal rhythm in a flow of thought and feeling which exist for one individual alone, and for him once only. There are other values less delicate which he can reproduce in himself at will, but can not altogether communicate to other minds whose thoughts and feelings are too much their own. There are other values, still less delicate, which he might communicate by vocal utterance and rhythmic gesture, taking possession as it were of the very pulse and respiration of

others. But poetry which is composed for publication ought to occupy itself with those rhythmic values which may be communicated to other rhythmic minds through the printing of words on a page. It ought to do this, at least, if it pretends to an attitude that is even in the most minute degree social.

[A mature science of rhythm] might be imagined to stride into the room where these poets are discussing the musical values of their verse, seize two or three of the most "free" and subtle among them, lock them into separate sound-proof chambers, and allow them to read one of their favorite passages into the ear of an instrument designed to record in spatial outline the pulsations of vocal accent. It is safe to assert that there would be less identity in the actual pulsations recorded than if the same two were reading a passage of highly wrought English prose.<sup>1</sup> And the reason for this is that free verse imports into English prose a form of punctuation that is exceedingly gross and yet abso-

<sup>1</sup> This statement is borne out by Mr. William Morrison Patterson's account of the records of Amy Lowell's reading of her poems in his laboratory. It constitutes the preface of the second edition of his book, "The Rhythm of Prose"—a book which, upon the true basis of experimentation, analyzes and defines convincingly for the first time the nature of rhythmical experience, and the manner in which it

lutely inconsequential. Its line division has neither a metrical nor a logical significance that exists objectively. It can mean at any time anything that is desirable to the whims, or needful to the difficulties, of the reader or the writer. It is a very sign and instrument of subjectivity. To incorporate in a passage of printed symbols an indeterminate element so marked and so frequent as that, is to say to the reader—"Take the passage and organize it into whatever rhythmical pattern may please yourself." And that is what the reader of free verse usually does, knowing that if he comes into any great difficulty, he can make a full stop at the end of some line, and shift the gears of his rhythm altogether. And since it is possible for one who is rhythmically gifted to organize *any indeterminate series of impressions whatever* into an acceptable rhythm, he frequently produces a very enjoyable piece of music, which he attributes to the author and, having made it himself, is not unable to admire. Thus a good many poets who could hardly beat a going march on a base drum, are enabled by the gullibility and talent of their

is derived by the reader both from prose and metrical poetry. Until it is amplified or improved by further investigation, this book will surely be the basis of every scientific discussion of the questions involved here.

readers to come forward in this kind of writing as musicians of special and elaborate skill. The "freedom" that it gives them is not a freedom to build rhythms that are impossible in prose, but a freedom from the necessity to build actual and continuous rhythms. Free verse avails itself of the rhythmic appearance of poetry, and it avoids the extreme rhythmic difficulties of prose, and so it will certainly live as a supremely convenient way to write, among those not too strongly appealed to by the greater convenience of not writing. But as an object of the effort of ambitious artists I can not believe it will widely survive the knowledge that it is merely a convenience, a form of [mumble and indetermination] in their art.

Walt Whitman, however he may have been deceived about the social and democratic character of his form, was not deceived, as the modern eulogists of free verse are, about its subtlety. He thought that he had gained in volume and directness of communion, but he knew that he was discarding subtlety, discarding in advance all those beautiful and decadent wonders of microscopic and morbid audacity that developed in France among the admirers of Poe. The modern disciples of his form, however, are materially of Poe's persuasion, and like to believe that they have in free verse an instrument

expressly fitted for the communication of those wonders, and of the most delicate modulations of that “verbal melody” that Whitman scorned. In this, from the true standpoint of criticism, Whitman has a commanding advantage over them, and what can be said of free-verse in general can not be said of his poems. He did achieve the predominant thing that he aimed to achieve—he made his poetry rough and artless in spite of his fineness and art. He made it like the universe and like the presence of a man. In that triumph it will stand. In that character it will mould and influence the literature of democracy, because it will mould and influence all literature in all lands.

“Who touches this book touches a man.”

There is, however, another ideal of poetry that Walt Whitman confused with this one, and that he no more exemplified in his form than he exemplified democratic and social communion. And this ideal is predominant too in the minds of his modern followers. It is the ideal of being natural, of being primitive, dismissing “refinements” and the tricks of literary sophistication. He wanted his poetry to sound with nature and the untutored heart of humanity. It was in the radiance of this desire that he spoke of rhythmical prose as a “vast diviner

heaven," toward which poetry would move in its future development in America. Prose seemed diviner to him because it seemed more simple, more large with candor and directness. But here again a [cool and clear science] will show that his nature led him in a contrary direction from its ideal. The music of prose is only dissimilar to that of poetry in its complexity, its subtle and refined *dissimulation* of the fundamental monotonous meter that exists, either expressed or implied, in the heart of all rhythmical experience. Persons who can read the rhythm of prose can do so because they have in their own breast, or intellect, a subdued or tacit perpetual standard pulse-beat, around which by various [instinctive-mathematical] tricks of substitution and syncopation they so arrange the accents of the uttered syllables that they fall in with its measure, and become one with it, increasing its momentum and its effect of entrancement upon the nerves and body. There is no rhythm without this metrical basis, no value in rhythm comparable to the trance that its thrilling monotony engenders. Its undulations are akin to the intrinsic character of neural motion, and that is why, almost as though it were a chemical thing — a stimulant and narcotic — it takes possession of our state-of-being and controls it.

Poetry only naïvely acknowledges this [ecstatic monotony] that lives in the heart of all rhythm, brings it out into the light, and there openly weaves upon it the patterns of melodic sound. Poetry is thus the more natural, and both historically and psychologically, the more primitive of the two arts. It is the more simple. Meter, and even rhyme, which is but a colored, light drum-beat, accentuating the meter, are not "ornaments" or "refinements" of something else which may be called "rhythmical speech." They are the heart of rhythmical speech expressed and exposed with a perfectly childlike and candid grandeur. Prose is the refinement. Prose is the sophisticated and studio accomplishment — a thing that vast numbers of people have not the fineness of endowment or cultivation either to write or read. Prose is a civilized sublimation of poetry, in which the original healthy intoxicant note of the tom-tom is so laid over with fine traceries of related sound, that it can no longer be identified at all except by the analytical eye of science.

Walt Whitman was not really playful and child-like enough to go back to nature. His poetry was less primitive and savage, than it was superhuman and sublime. His emotions were as though they came to him through a celestial telescope. There

is something more properly savage — something at least truly barbarous — in a poem like Poe's "Bells." And in Poe's insistence upon "beauty" as the sole legitimate province of the poem — beauty, which he defines as a special and dispassionate "excitement of the soul" — he is nearer to the mood of the snake dance. Poetry was to him a deliberate perpetration of ecstasy. And one can see in reading his verses how he was attuned to sway and quiver to the mere syllabic singing of a kettledrum, until his naked visions grew more intense and lovely than the passions and real meanings of his life. It is actually primitive, as well as childlike, to play with poetry in this intense and yet unsanctimonious way that Poe did, and Baudelaire too, and Swinburne. Play is nearer to the heart of nature than aspiration. It is healthier perhaps too, and more to the taste of the future, than priesthood. I think the essence of what we call classical in an artist's attitude is his quite frank acknowledgment that — whatever great things may come of it — he is at play. The art of the Athenians was objective and overt about being what it is, because the Athenians were educated, as all free men should be, for play. They were making things, and the eagerness of their hearts flowed freely out like a child's through their eyes upon

the things that they made. That pearl of [adult degeneration,] the self, was very little cultivated in Athens; the “artistic temperament” was unborn; and sin, and the perpetual yearning beyond of Christians, had not been thought of. A little group of isolated and exclusive miracles had not reduced all the true and current glories of life to a status of ignobility, so that every great thing must contain in itself intimations of otherness. The Athenians were radiantly willing, without any cosmical preparation or blare of moral resolve, to let the constellations stay where they are. It was their custom to “loaf and invite their souls,” to be “satisfied — see, dance, laugh, sing.” They were so maturely naïve that they would hardly understand what Walt Whitman, with his declarations of animal independence, was trying to recover from. And so it is by way of their happy and sun-loved city that we can most surely go back to nature.

And when we have arrived at a mood that is really and childly natural — a mood that will play, even with aspiration, and will spontaneously make out of interesting materials “things” to play with, and when in that mood we give our interest to the materials of reality in our own time, then perhaps we shall find that we have arrived also at a poetry that belongs to the people. For people are, in the

depths of them and on the average as they are born, still natural, still savage. And there is no doubt that nature never fashioned them to work harder, or be more serious, or filled with self-conscious purports, than was necessary. She meant them to live and flow out upon the world with the bright colors of their interest. And it will seem rather a fever in the light of universal history, this hot subjective meaningfulness of everything we modern occidentals value. The poets and the poet-painters of ancient China knew that all life and nature was so sacred with the miracle of being that only the lucid line and color was needed to command an immortal reverence. They loved perfection devoutly, as it will rarely be loved, but they too, with their gift of delicate freedom in kinship with nature, were at play. And in Japan even today — surviving from that time — there is a form of poetry that is objective and childlike, a making of toys, or of exquisite metrical gems of imaginative realization, and this is the only poetry in the world that is truly popular, and is loved and cultivated by a whole nation.

If with this pagan and oriental love for the created thing — the same love that kept a light in Poe's sombre heart — we enter somewhat irreverently into Walt Whitman's volume, seeking our own treasure

and not hesitating to remove it from its bed of immortal slag, we do find poems in new forms of exquisite and wonderful definition. Sometimes for the length of one or two or three lines, and occasionally for a stanza, and once for the whole poem—"When I heard at the close of the day"—Walt Whitman seems to love and achieve the carved concentration of image and emotion, the definite and thrilling chime of syllables along a chain that begins and ends and has a native way of uttering itself to all minds that are in tune. He seems, without losing that large grace of freedom from the pose and elegance of words in a book, which was his most original gift to the world, to possess himself of the mood that is truly primitive, and social, and intelligible to the hearts of simple people—the mood that loves with a curious wonder the poised and perfect existence of a thing.

### HUSH'D BE THE CAMPS

Hush'd be the camps today;  
And, soldiers, let us drape our war-worn weapons;  
And each with musing soul retire, to celebrate,  
Our dear commander's death.

No more for him life's stormy conflicts;  
Nor victory, nor defeat—no more time's dark events,  
Charging like ceaseless clouds across the sky.

## RECONCILIATION

Word over all, beautiful as the sky!  
Beautiful that war, and all its deeds of carnage, must in  
time be utterly lost;  
That the hands of the sisters Death and Night, incessantly  
softly wash again, and ever again, this soil'd world. . . .

These sculptural sentences, with their rhythmic and still clarity of form, if they had been the end and essence of his art, and not only a by-accident of inevitable genius, might have led the way, not perhaps to a great national poetry for America, but beyond that into something international and belonging to the universe of man. The step forward from them would not have been towards a greater sprawling and subjectifying of rhythmic and poetic character, but towards an increasing objective perfection which should still cling to the new and breathless thing, the presence of one who lives and speaks his heart naturally. I chose them, not only because they are among the most musical and imaginative lines that Walt Whitman wrote, but also because in bringing a mood that is calm and a lulling of wind in the world's agonies of hate, they show themselves to be deep. And so it will not be thought that when I say the poet of democracy will be a child who is at play with the making of things,

I desire to narrow the range and poignancy of the things he will make. He will be free, and he will move with a knowing and profound mind among all the experiences and the dreams of men. But to whatever heights of rhapsody, or moral aspiration, or now unimaginable truth, he may come, he will come as a child, whose clear eyes and deliberate creative purposes are always appropriate and never to be apologized for, because they are the purposes of nature.



## **POEMS**



## COMING TO PORT

Our motion on the soft still misty river  
Is like rest; and like the hours of doom  
That rise and follow one another ever,  
Ghosts of sleeping battle-cruisers loom  
And languish quickly in the liquid gloom.

From watching them your eyes in tears are  
gleaming,  
And your heart is still; and like a sound  
In silence is your stillness in the streaming  
Of light-whispered laughter all around,  
Where happy passengers are homeward bound.

Their sunny journey is in safety ending,  
But for you no journey has an end.  
The tears that to your eyes their light are lending  
Shine in softness to no waiting friend;  
Beyond the search of any eye they tend.

There is no nest for the unresting fever  
Of your passion, yearning, hungry-veined;  
There is no rest nor blessedness forever  
That can clasp you, quivering and pained,  
Whose eyes burn ever to the Unattained.

Like time, and like the river's fateful flowing,  
Flowing though the ship has come to rest,  
Your love is passing through the mist and going,  
Going infinitely from your breast,  
Surpassing time on its immortal quest.

The ship draws softly to the place of waiting,  
All flush forward with a joyful aim,  
And while their hands with happy hands are mating,  
Lips are laughing out a happy name—  
You pause, and pass among them like a flame.

## THE LONELY BATHER

Loose-veined and languid as the yellow mist  
That swoons along the river in the sun,  
Your flesh of passion pale and amber-kissed  
With years of heat that through your veins have run,

You lie with aching memories of love  
Alone and naked by the weeping tree,  
And indolent with inward longing move  
Your slim and sallow limbs despondently.

If love came warm and burning to your dream,  
And filled you all your avid veins require,  
You would lie sadly still beside the stream,  
Sobbing in torture of that vivid fire;

The same low sky would weave its fading blue,  
The river still exhale its misty rain,  
The willow trail its waving over you,  
Your longing only quickened into pain.

Bed your desire among the pressing grasses;  
Lonely lie, and let your thirsting breasts  
Lie on you, lonely, till the fever passes,  
Till the undulation of your longing rests.

## IN MY ROOM

In this high room, my room of quiet space,  
Sun-yellow softened for my happiness,  
I learn of you, Wang Wei, and of your loves;  
Your rhythmic fisher sweet with solitude  
Beneath a willow by the river stream;  
Your aged plum tree bearing lonely bloom  
Beside the torrent's thunder; misty buds  
Among your saplings; delicate-leaved bamboo.  
My room is sweet because of you, Wang Wei,  
Your tranquil and creative-fingered love  
So many mounds of mournful years ago  
In that cool valley where the colors lived.  
My ceiling slopes a little like far mountains.  
Your delicate-leaved bamboo can flourish here.

Wang Wei was a great Chinese painter and poet, of the  
8th century.

## HOURS

Hours when I love you, are like tranquil pools,  
The liquid jewels of the forest, where  
The hunted runner dips his hand, and cools  
His fevered ankles, and the ferny air  
Comes blowing softly on his heaving breast,  
Hinting the sacred mystery of rest.

## FIRE AND WATER

Flame-Heart, take back your love. Swift, sure  
And poignant as the dagger to the mark,  
Your will is burning ever; it is pure.  
Mine is vague water welling through the dark,  
Holding all substances — except the spark.

Picture the pleasure of the meadow stream  
When some clear striding naked-footed girl  
Cuts swift and straightly as a gleam  
Across its bosom ambling and aswirl  
With mooning eddies and soft lips acurl;

Such was our meeting — fatefully so brief.  
I have no purpose and no power to clutch.  
Gleam onward, maiden, to your goal of grief;  
And I more sadly flow, remembering much,  
Yet doomed to take the form of all I touch.

## YOU MAKE NO ANSWER

You make no answer. You have stolen away  
Deliberately in that twilight sorrow  
Where the dark flame that is your being shines  
So well. Mysterious and deeply tender  
In your motion you have softly left me,  
And the little path along the house is still.  
And I, a child forsaken of its mother,  
I, a pilgrim leaning for a friend,  
Grow faint, and tell myself in terror that  
My love reborn and burning shall yet bring you —  
More than friend and slender-bodied mother —  
O sweet-passioned spirit, shining home!

## OUT OF A DARK NIGHT

Death is more tranquil than the life of love,  
More calm, more sure, and more unanguished.  
O the path among the trees is far more tranquil to  
the dead  
Than to these anxious hearts, uptroubled from their  
beds,  
Who pace in pallid darkness on the leaves,  
For no good reason — for no reason  
But because their limbs will not lie still upon the  
sheet.  
Their limbs will not lie still. O how I pity them.  
Sad hearts — their marrow is a-quiver,  
And they can not lie them down in tranquil sadness  
like the dead.

## A MORNING

Again this morning the bold autumn,  
Spreading through the woods her sacred fire,  
Brings the rich color of your presence  
Warmly luminous to my desire —

Brings to my heart the dear wild worship,  
High and wayward as the windy air,  
And to my pulse the hot sweet passion  
Burning crimson like a poison there.

## ANNIVERSARY

The flowers we planted in the tender spring,  
And through the summer watched their blossoming,  
Died with our love in autumn's thoughtful weather,  
Died and dropped downward altogether.

Today in April in the vivid grass  
They flash again their laughter, pink and yellow,  
They wake before the frosty sunbeams pass,  
Gay bold to leave their chilly pillow.

But love sleeps longer in his wintry bed,  
He sleeps as though the lifting light were dead,  
And spring poured not her colors on the meadow,  
He sleeps in his cold sober shadow.

## AUTUMN LIGHT

So bright and soft is the sweet air of morning,  
And so tenderly the light descends,  
And blesses with its gentle-falling fingers  
All the leaves unto the valley's ends —

It brings them all to being when it touches  
With its paleness every glowing vein;  
The wild and flaming hollows of the forest  
Kindle all their crimson in its rain;

And every curve receives its share of morning,  
Every little shadow softly grows,  
And motion finds a melody more tender  
That like a phantom through the branches goes —

So bright and soft and tranquil-rendering,  
And quiet in its giving, as though love,  
The morning dream of life, were born of longing,  
And really poured its being from above.

## A MODERN MESSIAH

Scarred with sensuality and pain  
And weary labor in a mind not hard  
Enough to think, a heart too always tender,  
Sits the Christ of failure with his lovers.  
They are wiser than his parables,  
But he more potent, for he has the gift  
Of hopelessness, and want of faith, and love.

## IN A RED CROSS HOSPITAL

Today I saw a face — it was a beak,  
That peered, with pale round yellow vapid eyes,  
Above the bloody muck that had been lips  
And teeth and chin. A plodding doctor poured  
Some water through a rubber down a hole  
He made in that black bag of horny blood.  
The beak revived, it smiled — as chickens smile.  
The doctor hopes he'll find the man a tongue  
To tell with, what he used to be.

## A VISIT

You came with your small tapering flame of passion  
Thinly burning like a nun's desire,  
Your eyes in slim and half-expectant fashion  
Faintly painting what your veins require  
With little pallid pyramids of fire.

So very small and unfulfilled you sat,  
Building a little talk to keep you there,  
Your face and body pointed like a cat,  
Your legs not reaching down from any chair,  
Your thoughts not really reaching anywhere;

So dumb and tiny — yet Love guessed your mood,  
And pressed his phial in its fervent bed,  
And poured his thrilling philtre in my blood,  
And all his lustre on your body shed,  
And hot enamel on the words you said;

Your littleness became a monstrous thing,  
A rank retort, a hot and waiting vat,  
Your eyes green-copper like a snake in spring,  
And lusty-bold your laying off your hat,  
And fell your purpose like a hungry cat;

The dark fell on us through our narrowed eyes,  
The heat lashed up around us from the floor,  
En crimsoning the lips of our surprise  
To sway like music, and like burning pour  
Across the truth that parted us before.

## TO LOVE

Love, often your delicate fingers beckon,  
And always I follow.

Oh, if I could stay, and possess your beauty  
Beckoning always!

## **CAR-WINDOW**

**A light is laughing thro' the scattered rain,  
A color quickens in the meadow;  
Drops are still, upon the window-pane —  
They cast a silver shadow.**

## LITTLE FISHES

A myriad curious fishes,  
Tiny and pink and pale,  
All swimming north together  
With rhythmical fin and tail —

A mountain surges among them,  
They dart and startle and float,  
Mere wiggling minutes of terror,  
Into that mountain's throat.

## INVOCATION

Truth, be more precious to me than the eyes  
Of happy love; burn hotter in my throat  
Than passion; and possess me like my pride;  
More sweet than freedom; more desired than joy;  
More sacred than the pleasing of a friend.

## SOMETIMES

Sometimes a child's voice crying on the street  
Comes winging like an arrow through the wind  
To pierce my breast with you, my baby, and  
My pen is weak, and all my thinking dreams  
Are mist of yearning for the touch of you.

## TO MARIE SUKLOFF — AN ASSASSIN

In your lips moving fervently,  
Your eyes hot with fire,  
Life seems immortally young with desire,  
Life seems impetuous,  
Hungry free,  
Having no faith but its burning to be.

You could dance laughingly,  
Draw where you move,  
Hearts, hands and voices pouring you love.  
Youth be a carnival,  
Life be the queen,  
You could go dancing and singing and seen!

Whence came that tenderness  
Cruel and wild,  
Arming with murder the hand of a child?  
Whence came that breaking fire,  
Nursed and caressed  
With passion's white fingers for tyranny's breast?

In your soul sacredly,  
Deeper than fear,  
Burns there a miracle dreadful to hear?  
Virgin of murder,  
Was it God's breath,  
Begetting a savior, that filled you with Death?

## TO AN ACTRESS

You walk as vivid as a sunny storm  
Across the drinking meadows, through the eyes  
Of stricken men, with light and fury mingled,  
Making passionate and making young.  
You drive the mists, and lift the drooping heads,  
And in the sultry place of custom raise  
The naked colors of abounding life,  
And sound the crimson windy call of liberty.

## EYES

My heart is sick because of all the eyes  
That look upon you drinkingly.  
They almost touch you with their fever look!  
O keep your beauty like a mystic gem,  
Clear-surfaced — give no fibre grain of hold  
To those prehensile amorous bold eyes!  
My heart is sick!

O love, let not my heart  
Corrupt the flower of your liberty —  
Go spend your beauty like the summer sky  
That makes a radius of every glance,  
And with your morning color light them all!

## X RAYS

Your eyes were gem-like in that dim deep chamber  
Hushed and sombre with imprisoned fire,  
With yellow ghostly globes of intense æther  
Potent as the rays of pure desire.

Your voice was startled into vivid wonder,  
When the winged wild whining mystic wheel  
Took flight and shot the dark with frosty crashings  
Like an ice-berg splitting to the keel.

Your flesh was never warmer to my passion  
Than when, moving in that humor green,  
We saw with eyes our fragile bones enamoured  
Clasping sadly on the pallid screen.

You seemed so virginal and so undreaming  
Of the burning hunger in my eyes,  
To peer more fever-deeply in your being  
Than the very death of passion lies.

The subtle-tuned shy motions of your spirit,  
Fashioned through the ages for the sun,  
Were dumb in that green lustre-haunted cavern  
Where you walked a naked skeleton;

Slim-hipped and fluent and of lovely motion,  
Living to the tip of every bone,  
And ah, too exquisitely vivid-moving  
Ever to lie wanly down alone —

To lie forever down so still and slender,  
Tracing on the ancient screen of night  
That naked and pale writing of the wonder  
Of your beauty breathing in the light.

## **SONNETS**



## A PREFACE ABOUT SONNETS

Although so complex and difficult to construct, the sonnet has always seemed to me a natural and almost inevitable form. Whether the reason lies in its intrinsic nature, or in the tradition that surrounds it, is not easy to tell. A sonnet is almost exactly square, and yet it has a division sufficiently off the centre to make its squareness admirable instead of tiresome; and perhaps this simple trait, together with its closely woven structure of rhyme, is what gives it the quiet assurance it has—the tranquil rightness of a thing of nature or natural convenience. I feel towards an excellent sonnet as I imagine an eager horse may feel towards a good measure tightly filled up with golden grain.

This feeling is due partly to a kind of honesty of which the squareness of a sonnet is symbolic. It is a form in which poets can express themselves when they are not rhapsodically excited. And very often

they are not so excited, and at such times if they write rapid lyrics they have to whip themselves up with an emotion that they get out of the writing rather than out of the facts. And this makes much lyric poetry seem a little histrionic, whereas in order to create a sonnet at all, a concentration and sustainment of feeling is required that is inevitably equal to its more temperate pretensions.

The quality of being inevitably and honestly square may become a dreadful thing, however. And it makes this form inappropriate for persons who have not at least a certain degree of lyrical taste. In the hands of such persons a sonnet is not a poem, but an enterprise. They get inside that square with a whole lot of materials, colors and sounds and old clothes of ideas, and they push them round, and if they can not make them fill in properly and come up to the edges, they climb out and get some more. And the result is so palpably spreadout an object, always with lumps of imagery here and there, that it can not even be received in the linear sequence that is natural to the eye and ear.

This fault can be avoided by having strongly in mind while composing a sonnet, the virtues not specifically its own — the clarity, the running and pouring in single stream, that are the qualities of

song. And to these qualities the strict convention of its rhymes and the traditional relation of the sonnet's parts, ought to give way when there is a conflict between them, for if a poem has not rhapsody, it is the more important that it should have grace. At least that is my opinion, and I offer this preface, in expiatory rather than boastful vein, to those high priests of perfection who guard the sonnet as a kind of lonely reliquary of their god.

## A PRAISEFUL COMPLAINT

You love me not as I love, or when I  
Grow listless of the crimson of your lips,  
And turn not to your burning finger-tips,  
You would show fierce and feverish your eye,  
And hotly my numb wilfulness decry,  
Holding your virtues over me like whips,  
And stinging with the visible eclipse  
Of that sweet poise of life I crucify!

How can you pass so proudly from my face,  
With all the tendrils of your passion furled,  
So adequate and animal in grace,  
As one whose mate is only all the world!  
I never taste the sweet exceeding thought  
That you might love me, though I loved you not!

## THOSE YOU DINED WITH

They would have made you like a pageant, bold  
And nightly festive, lustre-lit for them,  
And round your beauty, like a dusky gem,  
Have poured the glamour of the pride of gold;  
And you would lie in life as in her bed  
The mistress of a pale king, indolent,  
Though hot her limbs and strong her languishment,  
And her deep spirit is unvisited.

But I would see you like a gypsy, free  
As windy morning in the sunny air,  
Your wild warm self, your vivid self, to be,  
A miracle of nature's liberty,  
Giving your gift of being kind and fair,  
High, gay and careless-handed everywhere!

## THE PASSIONS OF A CHILD

The passions of a child attend his dreams.  
He lives, loves, hopes, remembers, is forlorn  
For legendary creatures, whom he deems  
Not too unreal — until one golden morn  
The gracious, all-awaking sun shines in  
Upon his tranquil pillow, and his eyes  
Are touched, and opened greatly, and begin  
To drink reality with rich surprise.

I loved the impetuous souls of ancient story —  
Heroic characters, kings, queens, whose wills  
Like empires rose, achieved, and fell, in glory.  
I was a child, until the radiant dawn,  
Thy beauty, woke me — O thy spirit fills  
The stature of those heroes, they are gone!

## AS THE CRAG EAGLE

As the crag eagle to the zenith's height  
Wings his pursuit in his exalted hour  
Of her the tempest-reared, whose airy power  
Of plume and passion challenges his flight  
To that wild altitude, where they unite,  
In mutual tumultuous victory  
And the swift sting of nature's ecstasy,  
Their shuddering pinions and their skyward  
might —  
As they, the strong, to the full height of heaven  
Bear up that joy which to the strong is given,  
Thus, thus do we, whose stormy spirits quiver  
In the bold air of utter liberty,  
Clash equal at our highest, I and thee,  
Unconquered and unconquering forever!

## TO MY FATHER

The eastern hill hath scarce unveiled his head,  
And the deliberate sky hath but begun  
To meditate upon a future sun,  
When thou dost rise from thy impatient bed.  
Thy morning prayer unto the stars is said.  
And not unlike a child, the penance done  
Of sleep, thou goest to thy serious fun,  
Exuberant — yet with a whisper tread.

And when that lord doth to the world appear,  
The jovial sun, he leans on his old hill,  
And levels forth to thee a golden smile —  
Thee in his garden, where each warming year  
Thou toilst in all joy with him, to fill  
And flood the soil with Summer for a while.

TO EDWARD S. MARTIN  
FROM A PROFESSIONAL HOBO

How old, my friend, is that fine-pointed pen  
Wherewith in smiling quietude you trace  
The maiden maxims of your writing-place,  
And on this gripped and mortal-sweating den  
And battle-pit of hunger now and then  
Dip out, with nice and intellectual grace,  
The faultless wisdoms of a nurtured race  
Of pale-eyed, pink, and perfect gentlemen!

How long have art and wit and poetry,  
With all their power, been content, like you,  
To gild the smiling fineness of the few,  
To filmy-curtain what they dare not see,  
In multitudinous reality,  
The rough and bloody soul of what is true!

(In an editorial in *Life*, Mr. Martin had described as "professional hoboes" a number of revolutionary agitators whom he did not like—Pancho Villa, William D. Haywood, Wild Joe O'Carroll—and he did me the honor to include me among them.)

## **EUROPE — 1914**

Since Athens died, the life that is a light  
Has never shone in Europe. Alien moods,  
The oriental morbid sanctitudes,  
Have darkened on her like the fear of night.  
In happy augury we dared to guess  
That her pure spirit shot one sunny glance  
Of pagany across the fields of France,  
Clear startling this dim fog of soulfulness.

But now, with arms and carnage and the cries  
Of Holy Murder, rolling to the clouds  
Her bloody-shadowed smoke of sacrifice,  
The Superstition conquers, and the shrouds  
Of sick black wonder lay their murky blight  
Where shone of old the immortal-seeming light.

## ISADORA DUNCAN

You bring the fire and terror of the wars  
Of infidels in thunder-running hordes,  
With spears like sun-rays, shields, and wheeling  
swords  
Flame shape, death shape and shaped like scimi-  
tars,  
With crimson eagles and blue pennantry,  
And teeth and armor flashing, and white eyes  
Of battle horses, and the silver cries  
Of trumpets unto storm and victory!

Who is this naked-footed lovely girl  
Of summer meadows dancing on the grass?  
So young and tenderly her footsteps pass,  
So dreamy-limbed and lightly wild and warm —  
The bugles murmur and the banners furl,  
And they are lost and vanished like a storm!

## THE SUN

- Now autumn, and that sadness as of love  
Heroic in immortal solitude;
  - Those veins of flaming passion through the wood;
  - But in the blue and infinite above
  - A shining circle like the light of truth,
  - Self-poising; deathless his desire sublime,
  - Whose motion is the measurement of time,
  - Whose step is morning, and his smile is youth.
- 
- No passion burns upon the livid earth
  - Whose stain can tint that circle, or whose cry
  - Can rout the tranquilly receiving sky.
  - All passion, all its crimson stream, from birth  
To murder, bloom and pestilential blight,  
All flows beneath the sanction of his light.

## THE NET

The net brings up, how long and languidly,  
A million vivid quiverings of life,  
Keen-finned and gleaming like a steely knife,  
All colors, green and silver of the sea,  
All forms of skill and eagerness to be —  
They die and wither of the very breath  
That sounds your pity of their lavish death  
While they are leaping, star-like, to be free.

They die and wither, but the agéd sea,  
Insane old salty womb of mystery,  
Is pregnant with a million million more,  
Whom she will suckle in her oozy floor,  
Whom she will vomit on a heedless shore,  
While onward her immortal currents pour.

## A DUNE SONNET

I was so lonely on the dunes to-day;  
The shadow of a bird passed o'er the sand,  
And I, a driftwood relic in my hand . . .  
Sea winds are not more lonely when they stray  
A little fitful and bewildered way  
In this wan acre, whose dry billows stand  
So pitilessly still of curve, so bland,  
And wide, and waiting, infinitely grey.

In hollows I could almost hear them say,  
The misty breezes — Run, we will not stay  
In this unreal and spiritual land!  
Our soul of life is calling from the strand,  
Whose blue and breathing bosom leapt or lay  
Or laughed to us in shots of silver spray!

## **SONGS**



## SEA-SHORE

The wind blows in along the sea —  
Its salty wet caresses  
Impart to all the ships that be  
A thrill before it passes.

The tide is never at a stand,  
A mountain in its motion,  
Forever homing to the land,  
And ever to the ocean.

And on its fickle, mighty breast  
The waters still are moving,  
With love in every running crest  
And laughter in the loving —

Light love to touch the prows of ships  
That slip along so slenderly.  
I would as lightly touch your lips,  
And your heart as tenderly,

If you would move with all that move,  
The flowing and caressing,  
Who have no firmness in their love,  
No sorrow in its passing.

## RAINY SONG

Down the dripping pathway dancing through the  
rain,  
Brown eyes of beauty, laugh to me again!

Eyes full of starlight, moist over fire,  
Full of young wonder, touch my desire!

O like a brown bird, like a bird's flight,  
Run through the rain drops lithely and light.

Body like a gypsy, like a wild queen,  
Slim brown dress to slip through the green —

The little leaves hold you as soft as a child,  
The little path loves you, the path that runs wild.

Who would not love you, seeing you move,  
Warm-eyed and beautiful through the green grove?

Let the rain kiss you, trickle through your hair,  
Laugh if my fingers mingle with it there,

**Laugh if my cheek too is misty and drips —  
Wetness is tender — laugh on my lips**

**The happy sweet laughter of love without pain,  
Young love, the strong love, burning in the rain.**

## A HYMN TO GOD

### IN TIME OF STRESS

Lift, O dark and glorious Wonder,  
Once again thy gleaming sword,  
Cleave this killing doubt asunder  
With one sheer and sacred word!

For my heart is weak and broken,  
And the struggle runs too high,  
And there is no burning token  
In the new immortal sky.

Oh, not curb or courage only  
Does my hour demand of me,  
It is thought supreme and lonely  
And responsible and free!

And I quail before the danger  
As a bark before the blast,  
When the beacon star's a stranger  
In the mountains piling fast,

And there is no light but reason  
And the compass of the ship.  
God, a word of thine in season!  
God, a motion of thy lip!

## COMING SPRING

**Ice is marching down the river,  
Gaily out to sea!  
Sunbeams o'er the snow-hills quiver,  
Setting torrents free!**

**Yellow are the water-willows,  
Yellow clouds are they,  
Rising where the laden billows  
Swell along their way!**

**Arrows of the sun are flying!  
Winter flees the light,  
And his chilly horn is sighing  
All the moisty night!**

**Lovers of the balmy weather,  
Lovers of the sun!  
Drifts and duty melt together —  
Get your labors done!**

**Ice is marching down the river,  
Gaily out to sea!  
Sing the healthy-hearted ever,  
Spring is liberty!**

## DAISIES

Daisies, daisies, all surprise!  
Open wide your sunny eyes!  
See the linnet on the wing;  
See the crimson feather!  
See the life in every thing,  
Sun, and wind, and weather!  
Shadow of the passer-by,  
Bare-foot skipping over,  
Meadow where the heifers lie,  
Butter-cup, and clover!  
All is vivid, all is real,  
All is high surprising!  
Ye are pure to see and feel;  
Ye the gift are prizing  
Men and gods would perish for —  
Gods with all their thunder! —  
Could they have the thing ye are,  
Everlasting wonder!

## BOBOLINK

Bright little bird with a downward wing,  
How many birds within you sing?

Two or three at the least it seems,  
Overflowing golden streams.

If I could warble on a wing so strong,  
Filling five acres full of song,

I'd never sit on the grey rail fence,  
I'd never utter a word of sense,

I'd float forever in a light blue sky,  
Uttering joy to the passers-by!

## DIOGENES

A hut, and a tree,  
And a hill for me,  
And a piece of a weedy meadow.

I'll ask no thing,  
Of God or King,  
But to clear away His shadow.

## **EARLIER POEMS**



## EARLIER POEMS

### A PREFACE ABOUT THEIR PHILOSOPHY

Most of the friends who read the volume from which these poems are selected, wanted to ask me what I meant by one of the titles, "The Thought of Protagoras." And I meant so much—I meant to convey in that phrase the hue of the philosophic background upon which the colors of my life are drawn—that since I failed, I venture to enlarge its meaning here with a word of confession.

An attitude that might be called affirmative scepticism is native to my mind, and underlies every impulse that I have to portray the universal character of life and truth.) We seek among all our experiences for some absolute and steadfast value by which, or toward which, we may guide ourselves, but there is no absolute value except life itself, the having of experiences. And among all our opinions we seek for an objective and eternal truth, but

- ✓ nothing is eternally true except the variety of opinions. Intermittently throughout the whole history of western, and I suppose of eastern thought, this mood has arisen. It was the mood of Protagoras, and of that Protagorean vein in Plato which is the height of ancient wisdom. It arose again, after a period of bright-minded investigation and formulation of "isms," in Sextus Empiricus and the little group of Alexandrian scientists — the last light to go out in the darkness of the reign of saints and theologies. Again, after those ages of sombre and oppressive faith under the roof of the cathedral, it appeared in the great Montaigne. The writings of
- ✓ Montaigne arrive in history with a bold and tranquil flavor of delight in free meditation, as though the too Sunday-serious world had at last made up its mind to escape from church and go fishing. It is a reverent Sabbath holiday in human thought. Almost immediately, however, the insane passion of belief recurs. Descartes' attempt at a surgery of doubt is only the pathetic opening of space for new and enormous growths of the old substance. Spinoza follows him, the God-intoxicated man, and Leibnitz and other monumental believers. And
- ✓ then David Hume quietly prepares, and once more offers to mankind, in his clear, humble and noble enquiry about Human Understanding, the sceptic

wisdom, the moral equilibrium, that would save its health and reason. But Kant and Hegel and those mountainous Germans, the giants of soul-vapor, overwhelming again with their rationalizations of primitive egotism, send all the world to the madhouse of metaphysical conviction. And from this we are now again issuing awakened — for the fifth time. And today the awakener is no individual. The awakener is science — empirical science turning its brave eyes upon man, its maker, to reveal the origin and destroy the excessive pretensions of his thoughts. And so once again the sanity of the world has been saved — or so at least it seems to one whose intellectual home is in these ages of sacred doubt.

Thoughts that are abstract logically, are, psychologically, concrete things. General ideas are specific occurrences. They are occurrences in an individual mind, reflecting perhaps a material disturbance in a brain. And these things and occurrences can, in the conception of science, be explained as the result of antecedent causes. They, which are the sovereign instruments of explanation, can themselves become the subject of explanation, and therein lose their impersonality and their universality which was their truth. Such, I think, is the modern counterpart of the thought of Prota-

goras, summarized for the ancients in his famous saying that "man is the measure of all things."

This thought used to come to my mind strongly in a seminar at Columbia University, where in a shadowy corner of the great library at sunset we gathered to read and study the writings of Spinoza. Our teacher was a scholar of philosophy with the rarest gift of sinking himself emotionally, as well as with intellect, into the metaphysical system of the philosopher he studied. He is not the one I have portrayed in my poem — that is a product of my imagination. But he seemed always so ingenuous to me, in his acceptance of the existence of realities corresponding to the vast abstractions of that philosopher of eternity, that I could not but see continually in my fancy demons of time and the concrete conspiring against him among the alleys of the book-shelves; and there came the thought of death walking straight into that chamber to annihilate the event of the individual idea — the only actual thing denoted for me by his words of portentous and childish-universal import. In my poem I tried to make such a death portray and prove to the imagination the thought of Protagoras.

In another poem, Leif Ericson, I made the same reflection a theme of joy and a kind of pagan sermon of life. The voyage of that wonderful

sailor out over the challenging blue, without knowledge and without sanction of ends, is a symbol of the adventure of individual being. It is an example to our hearts, so fond of faith and prudence, so little filled by nature with moral courage and abandon.

## AT THE AQUARIUM

Serene the silver fishes glide,  
Stern-lipped, and pale, and wonder-eyed;  
As through the aged deeps of ocean,  
They glide with wan and wavy motion.  
They have no pathway where they go,  
They flow like water to and fro.  
They watch with never winking eyes,  
They watch with staring, cold surprise,  
The level people in the air,  
The people peering, peering there,  
Who wander also to and fro,  
And know not why or where they go,  
Yet have a wonder in their eyes,  
Sometimes a pale and cold surprise.

## EARTH'S NIGHT

Sombre,

Sombre is the night, the stars' light is dimmed  
With smoky exhalations of the earth,  
Whose ancient voice is lifted on the wind  
In ceaseless elegies and songs of tears.  
O earth, I hear thee mourning for thy dead!  
Thou art waving the long grass over thy graves;  
Murmuring over all thy resting children,  
That have run and wandered and gone down  
Upon thy bosom. Thou wilt mourn for him  
Who looketh now a moment on these stars,  
And in the moving boughs of this dark night  
Heareth the murmurous sorrow of thy heart.

## THE THOUGHT OF PROTAGORAS

My memory holds a tragic hour to prove,  
Or paint with bleeding stroke, the ancient thought  
That will to sorrow move all minds forever —  
All that love to know. It was the hour  
When lamps wink yellow in the winter twilight,  
And the hurriers go home to rest;  
And we whose task was meditation rose  
And wound a murmuring way among the books  
And effigies, the fading fragrance, of  
A vaulted library — a place to me  
Most like a dim vast cavernous brain, that holds  
All the world hath of musty memory  
In sombre convolutions that are dying.  
There at our faithful table every day,  
In the great shadow of this dissolution,  
We would speak of things eternal, things  
Divine, that change not. And we spoke with one  
Who was a leader of the way to them;  
A man born regal to the realms of thought.  
High, pale, and sculptural his brow,  
And high his concourse with the kings of old,  
Plato, and Aristotle, and the Jew —  
The bold, mild Jew who in his pensive chamber  
Fell in love with God. It was of him,

And that unhungering love of his, he told us;  
And with soft and stately melody,  
The scholar's eloquence, he lifted us  
Sublime above the very motions of  
Our mortal being, and we walked with him  
The heights of meditation like the gods.  
I have no memory surpassing this.  
And yet — strange pity of our natures or  
Of his — there ran a rumor poisonous.  
Scandal breeds her brood in the house of prayer.  
And we, to whom these were like hours of prayer,  
We whispered things not all philosophy  
When he was gone. We knew but little where  
He went, or whence he came, but this we knew,  
That there was other love in him than what  
He taught us — love that makes more quickly pale!  
Ay, even he was tortured with the lure  
Of mortal motion in the eyes — and lips  
And limbs that were not warm to him alone  
Were warm to him. He drank mortality.  
Dim care, the ghost of retribution, sat  
In pallor on his brow, and made us whisper  
In the shadow of our meditations.  
Faintly, faintly did we feel the hour  
Advancing — livid painting of a thought!

He spoke of Substance,— strangely — on that day —

Eternal, self-existent, infinite —

He seemed, I thought, to rest upon the name.

And as he spoke there came on me that trance  
Of inattention, when the words would seem

To drop their magic of containing things,

And, by a shift, become but things themselves —

Mere partial motions of the flesh of lips.

I watched these motions, watched them blandly, till

I knew I watched them, and that roused me, and

I heard him saying, “ Things, and moving things,  
Are merely modes of but one attribute,

Of what is infinite in attributes,

And may be called —” He spoke to there, and  
then —

His pencil, the thin pencil, dropped — A crack  
Behind us — A quick step among the books —

His hand, his head, his body all collapsed

And fell, or settled utterly, before

The fact came on us — he was shot and killed.

But little I remember after that.

What matters it? The deed, the quick red deed  
Was done, and all his speculations vanished

Like a sound.

## TO THE ASCENDING MOON

Rise, rise, aerial creature, fill the sky  
With supreme wonder, and the bleak earth wash  
With mystery! Pale, pale enchantress, steer  
Thy flight high up into the purple blue,  
Where faint the stars beholding — rain from there  
Thy lucent influence upon this sphere!

I fear thee, sacred mother of the mad!  
With thy deliberate magic thou of old  
Didst soothe the perplexed brains of idiots whipped,  
And scared, and lacerated for their cure —  
Ay, thou didst spread the balm of sleep on them,  
Give to their minds a curvèd emptiness  
Of silence like the heaven thou dwellest in;  
Yet didst thou also, with thy rayless light,  
Make mad the surest, draw from their smooth beds  
The very sons of Prudence, maniacs  
To wander forth among the bushes, howl  
Abroad like eager wolves, and snatch the air!  
Oft didst thou watch them prowl among the tombs  
Inviolate of the patient dead, toiling  
In deeds obscure with stealthy ecstasy,  
And thou didst palely peer among them, and  
Expressly shine into their unhinged eyes!  
I fear thee, languid mother of the mad!

For thou hast still thy alien influence;  
Thou dost sow forth thro' all the fields and hills,  
And in all chambers of the natural earth,  
A difference most strange and luminous.  
This tree, that was the river sycamore,  
Is in thy pensive effluence become  
But the mind's mystic essence of a tree,  
Upright luxuriance thought upon — the stream  
Is liquid timeless motion undefined —  
The world's a gesture dim. Like rapturous  
thought,  
Which can the rigorous concrete obscure  
Unto annihilation, and create  
Upon the dark a universal vision,  
Thou — even on this bold and local earth,  
The site of the obtruding actual —  
Thou dost erect in awful purity  
The filmy architecture of all dreams.  
And they are perfect. Thou dost shed like light  
Perfection, and a vision give to man  
Of things superior to the tough act,  
Existence, and almost co-equals of  
His own unnamed, and free, and infinite wish!  
Phantoms, phantoms of the transfixed mind!  
Pour down, O moon, upon the listening earth —  
The earth unthinking, thy still eloquence!

Shine in the children's eyes. They drink thy light,  
And laugh in innocence of sorcery,  
And love thy silver. I laugh not, nor gaze  
With half-closed lids upon the awakened night.  
Nay, oft when thou art hailed above the hill,  
I lean not forth, I hide myself in tasks,  
Even to the blunt comfort of routine  
I cling, to drowse my soul against thy charm,  
Yearning for thee, ethereal miracle!

## LEIF ERICSON

Through the murk of the ocean of history northward and far,  
I descry thee, O Sailor! Thy deed like the dive of a star  
Doth startle the ages of darkness through which it is hurled,  
Doth flash, and flare out, and is gone from the eyes of the world!

What watchers beheld thee, and heralding followed thy lead,  
Or bugled the nations into the track of thy deed?  
What continent soundeth thy name, what people thy praise?  
Who sendeth the signal of gratitude back to the days  
When thou in thy boat didst put forth from the world, and defy  
Infinity, ignorance, tempest, and ocean, and sky?  
No, history brags not of God, nor doth history brag  
Of thee, sailor, who carried thy sail and thy sea-colored flag

Leif Ericson, the Norse adventurer, sailed to America 500 years before Columbus.

Clear over His seas, drove into His mystery old  
The prow of thy sixty-foot skerry, whose quivering  
hold  
Could dip but a cupful out of His watery wrath,  
That stormed thee, and snatched at thy bowsprit,  
and licked up thy path!

When mythical rumor sky-carried ran over the  
earth,  
With the whisper of lands that were dreamed of  
beyond the red birth  
Of the west-wind, the blood of thy body took run-  
ning fire  
To launch and be swift o'er the sea as a man's  
desire!

O rare is the northern morning that shineth for  
thee!  
A million silvering crests on the cold blue sea —  
And the wind drives in from the jubilant sea to the  
land,  
And, catching thy laughter, it tosses the cloak in thy  
hand,  
As taunting thee forth to thy sails in the frosty air,  
Where thousands surround thee with awe and a  
wondering prayer.

And they that stand with thee — tumultuous-hearted  
they stand!

They bend at thy word — I hear the boat sing on  
the sand —

And they slip to their oars as the boat leaps aloft  
on a wave,

With thee at the windy helm, joyful and joyfully  
brave!

• . . . .  
The depth of the billows is awful, the depth of the  
sky

Is silent as God. Silent the dark on high.

Naught sings to thy heart save thy heart and the  
wind, the wild giant

Of ocean, agrin in the darkness, who rattles defiant  
A laugh through thy rigging, and howls from the  
clouds at thee,

And moans in a mimic of pain and a murmurous  
glee.

Still stern I behold thee, thy stature dim through  
the dark,

Unmoved, unreleasing the helm of thy storm-driven  
bark.

“ O God of our fathers, give signs to our sea-worn  
eyes!

Give sight to Thy sailors! Give but the sun to arise

In the morn on an island pale in the haze of the west!

O beam of the star in the north, is thy only behest  
To gesture me onward eternally unto no shore  
Of these high and wild waters, famed for their  
hunger of yore?

Then give to thy sailor for life the courage of death,

To encounter the taunt of this wind with a rougher breath

Of gigantic contempt in the soul for where and when,

So it be onward impetuous, living, onward again!  
He saileth safe who carrieth death on board,  
He flieth a laughing sail in the wrath of the Lord!"  
So sang thy heart to thy heart, and so to the swinging sea

In a lull of the wind, the song of a spirit free!

Serene adventurer, lover of distance divine,  
Pursuing thy love forever though never thine,  
O sun-tanned king with thy blue eyes over the sea,  
Who dares to sing, and live, the praise of thee?

Not they that safe in a haven of certainty, steer  
From mooring to mooring with faith and with fear,

And pray for a map of the universe, pointer, and plan,  
When all the blue waves of the ocean the courage of man  
Challenge to venture, not they are the praisers of thee!  
Nor they who sail for the cargo, and dream that the sea,  
In its wanton wild infinite wonder of motion and sound,  
Is bound by a purpose, as their little breathing is bound.  
The profit of thy great sailing to thee was small,  
And unto the world it was nothing — a man, that was all,  
And his deed like a star, to flame in the dull old sky!  
Of the story of apathy, age after decorous age going by!  
Grapes were thy import, winey and luscious to eat,  
Grapes, and a story — “The dew in the west was sweet!”  
Wine of the distance ever the reddest seems,  
And sweet is the world to the dreamer and doer of dreams!

Weigh them, O pale-headed merchants — little ye  
know!

Compute, O desk-dwellers, ye will not measure him  
so,

For ye know only knowledge, ye know not the drive  
of the will

That brought it with passion to birth — it driveth  
still

Through the hearts of the kindred of earth, the for-  
ward fleeing,

The kin of the stormy soul at the helm of all-being!

Sailors, unreefed, and high-masted, and wet, and  
free,

Who sail in the love of the billows, whose port is  
the sea —

They sing thee, O Leif the Lucky, they sing thee  
sublime,

And launch with thee, glad as with God, on the  
ocean of time!

## MIDNIGHT

Midnight is come,  
And thinly in the deepness of the gloom  
Truth rises startle-eyed out of a tomb,  
    And we are dumb.

A death-bell tolls,  
And we still shudder round the too smooth bed,  
For Truth makes pallid watch above the dead,  
    Freezing our souls.

But day returns,  
Light and the garish life, and we are brave,  
For Truth sinks wanly down into her grave.  
    Yet the heart yearns.

## IN MARCH

On a soaked fence-post a little blue-backed bird,  
Opening her sweet throat, has stirred  
A million music-ripples in the air  
That curl and circle everywhere.  
They break not shallow at my ear,  
But quiver far within. Warm days are near!

## TO THE FLOWERS AT CHURCH

Soft little daughters of the mead,  
The random bush, the wanton weed,  
That lived to love, and loved to breed,  
    Who hither bound you?  
You're innocent of all the screed  
    That blows around you.

Sweet daffodils so laughing yellow,  
Beneath a bending pussy-willow,  
You need not try to gulp and swallow  
    The Apostles' Creed,  
Or shudder at the fates that follow  
    Adam's deed.

Big bloody hymns the choir sings,  
And blows it to the King of Kings,  
The while you dream of humble things  
    That wander there  
Where first you spread your golden wings  
    On summer air;

Like Jesus, simple and divine,  
In beauty, not in raiment fine,  
Who asked no high or holier shrine  
    In which to pray,  
Than garden groves of Palestine  
    'Neath olives gray.

His name, I think, would still be bright  
Though churches were unbuilded quite,  
And they whose hearts are toward the height  
    Should simple be,  
And lift their heads into the light  
    As straight as ye.

## TO THE LITTLE BED AT NIGHT

Good-night, little bed, with your patient white pillow,

Your light little spread, and your blanket of yellow!

I wonder what leaves you so pensive to-night —  
The breezes are tender, the stars are so bright,  
I should think you would wrinkle a little and smile,  
And be happy to think we can sleep for a while.  
Are you waiting for something? Or are you just  
seeming

To listen so breathlessly, hushed, as though dream-  
ing

A form that is fresher than breezes so light,  
A coming more precious than stars to the night,  
Who shall mould you as soft as the breast of a bil-  
low,

And crown with all beauty your patient white pil-  
low?

Good-night, little bed — are you lonely so late?  
We will lie down together, together we'll wait.

## IN A DUNGEON OF RUSSIA

*Scene:* A cell leading to the gallows.

*Characters:* A noble lady, who is an assassin.  
A common murderer.

The chilling gray, a ghost of mortal dawn,  
Has touched them, and they know the hour. The  
guard

Shifts guiltily his shoes upon the stone.  
They raise their eyes in languid terror; but  
The moment passes, and 'tis still again —  
Save, in some piteous way she moves her throat.  
There is a wandering of her burning eyes,  
Until they fix, and strangely stare upon  
The face of her companion. They would plead  
Against the heavy horror of his look;  
For not an idiot's corpse could strike the soul  
More sick with wonder.

“ O look up and speak  
To me! ”— Her voice is startling to the walls —  
“ Speak any word against this gloom! ”

He moves

A blood-deserted eye, but answers not.  
“ Tell if 'twas cold and filthy where you lay! ”

“ Ay, filthy cold! 'Twas cold enough to keep  
The carrion from rotting on these bones!  
They never kill us — never 'til we hang! ”

He spoke a brutal tongue against the gloom.  
And there was heard far off a step, a voice.  
The guard stood up; a quiver moved her limbs.

“ Give me some simple word. Give me your hand  
In comradeship. We die together — and  
The while we breathe — we are each other's world.”

“ No — not your world, my lady! Though we die,  
I have no grace to give a hand to you.  
My hand is thick and dirty — yours is pale! ”

“ You say ‘ my lady ’ in the very tomb!  
Will even death not laugh this weakness off  
Your tongue? To think nobility abides  
This hour! *My lady!* O, it is a curse  
That whips me at the grave! I was not born —  
Can I not even die, a human soul? ”

"Yes, you can die! And better — you can kill!  
'Tis not your ladyship — the gallows' rope  
Snaps that to nothing! Death? Not death alone  
Can laugh at your nobility — I laugh.  
No — not your piteous ladyship — that dies.  
It is your crime that daunts me — That shall live!  
To plant, with this fine delicate little hand,  
Small heavy death into the very heart  
Of time-defended tyranny — that lives!  
The future is all life for you. For me —  
A glassy look, a yell into the air,  
And I am gone! No life springs up from me!  
I am the dirt that drank the drippings of  
A guilty murder — that is why I sit  
Like sickness here, and goad you with my shame!  
I'll take your hand. I'll tell you I was starved,  
Wrecked, shattered to the bones with drunken hun-  
ger,  
And I killed for gold. I'll tell you this —  
Your crime shall live to blot the memory  
Of mine, and me, and all the insane tribe  
Of us, who having strength in poverty  
Will not lie down and starve — blot off the world  
Our having been — the crime of our killed hopes,  
And gradual infamy!"

The fever gleam  
Was in his eyes — the future! There it burned  
A moment, while he stood to see the door  
Swing darkly open, and the guard salute.  
She stood beside him. And together in  
High union of their fainting hearts, they faced  
The hour that brought them to their level graves.

March, 1912.

## TO A TAWNY THRUSH

Pine spirit!  
Breath and voice of a wild glade!  
In the wild forest near it,  
In the cool hemlock or the leafy limb,  
Whereunder  
Thou didst run and wander  
Thro' the sun and shade,  
An elvish echo and a shadow dim,  
There in the twilight thou dost lift thy song,  
And give the stilly woods a silver tongue.  
Out of what liquid is thy laughing made?  
A sister of the water thou dost seem,  
The quivering cataract thou singest near,  
Whose glistening stream,  
Unto the listening ear,  
Thou dost outrun with thy cascade  
Of music beautiful and swift and clear —  
A joy unto the mournful forest given!  
As when afar  
A travelling star  
Across our midnight races,  
A moving gleam that quickly ceases,  
Lost in the blue black abyss of heaven,

So doth thy light and silver singing  
Start and thrill  
The silence round thy piney hill,  
Unto the sober hour a jewel bringing —  
A mystery — a strain of rhythm fleeing —  
A vagrant echo winging  
Back to the unuttered theme of being!

## THE SAINT GAUDENS STATUES

Poet, thy dreams are grateful to the air  
And the light loves them. Tho' they murmur not,  
Their carven stillness is a music rare,  
And like the song of one whose tongue hath caught  
The clear ethereal essence of his thought.

I hear the talkers come, the changing throngs  
That with the fashions of a day surround  
Thy visions, and I hear them quell their tongues,  
And hush their querulous shoes upon the ground;  
Thy dreams are with the crown of silence  
crowned —

Though they feel not the glowing diadem,  
Who sleep for aye in their cool shapes of stone.  
Nor ever will the sunlight waken them,  
Nor ever will they turn their eyes and moan,  
To think that their brief Poet's life is gone.

These statues were exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum after the sculptor's death. The figures alluded to are the famous statue of Abraham Lincoln, and the monument in memory of Mrs. Henry Adams, the original of which is in the Rock Creek Cemetery at Washington.

The tender and the lofty soul is gone,  
Who eyed them forth from darkness, and confessed  
His spirit's motion in unmoving stone.  
His praise upon no mortal tongue doth rest;  
By these unwhispering lips it is expressed.

Soon will the ample arms of night withdraw  
Her shuffling children from the twilit hall —  
From that heroic presence, in dim awe  
Of whom the dark withdraws a while her pall,  
And leaves him luminous above them all.

Then are ye lost in darkness and alone,  
Ye ghostly spirits! And the moment rare  
Doth quicken that too sad and nameless stone,  
To move her robe, and spill her sable hair,  
And be in silence mingled with the air;

For she is one with the dim glimmering hour,  
And the white spirits beautiful and still,  
And the veiled memory of the vanished power  
That moulded them, the high and infinite will  
That earth begets and earth does not fulfil.

## SUMMER SUNDAY

Borne on the low lake wind there floats to me,  
Out of the distant hill, a sigh of bells,  
Mystic, worshipful, almost unheard,  
As though the past should answer me, and I  
In pagan solitude bow down my head.













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